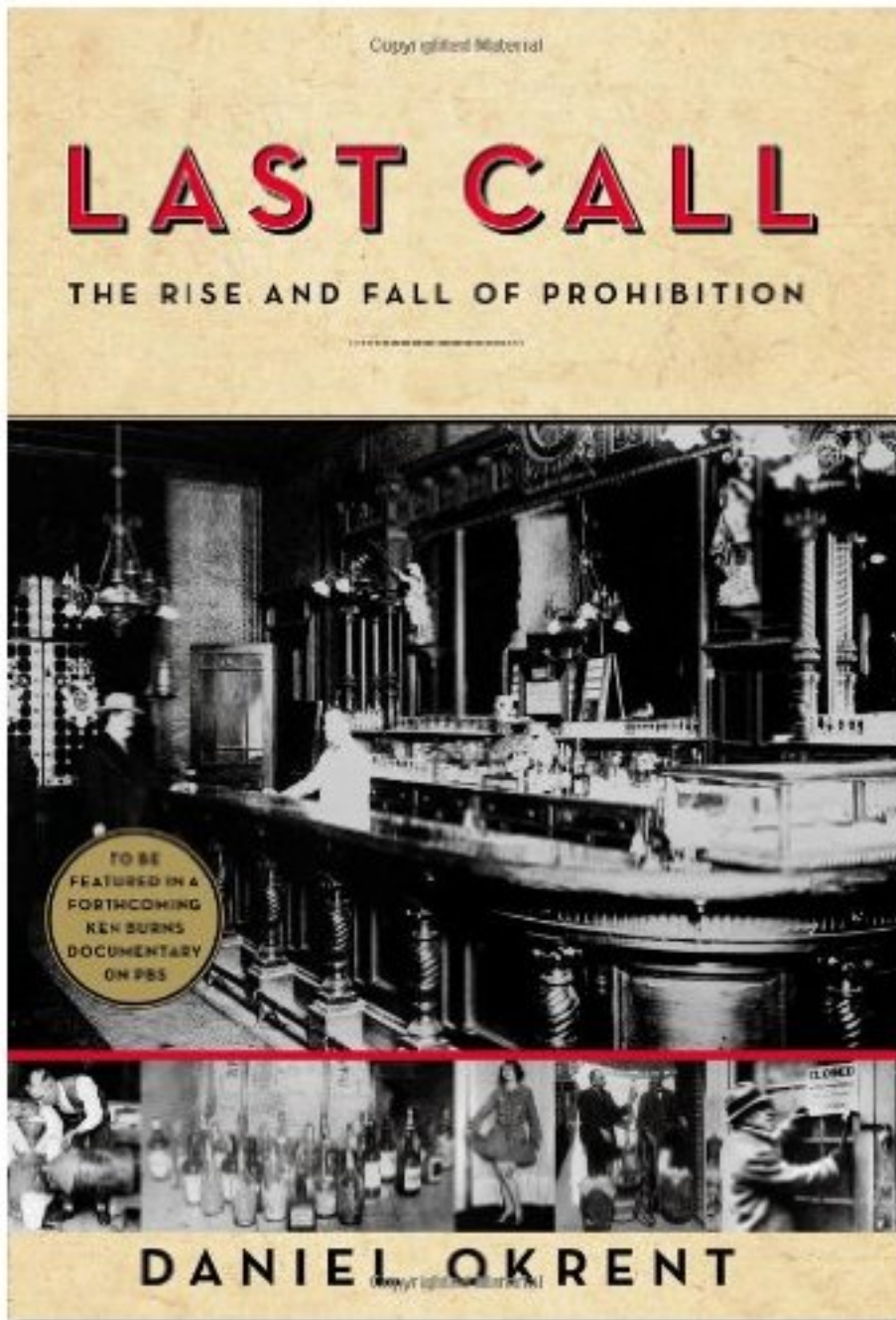


Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition



Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition

by Daniel Okrent

Reviewed by [George De Stefano](#) | Released: May 11, 2010
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From January 1920 to December 1933, Americans were forbidden by law to manufacture, possess, or distribute alcoholic beverages. Today the long-ago Prohibition era evokes quaint images of speakeasies, inebriated flappers dancing the Charleston, federal agents taking axes to barrels of bootleg beer, and mobsters protecting their illegal trade with tommy guns.

But as Daniel Okrent demonstrates in his magisterial social history, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*, the enactment of the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was the culmination of decades of social and political activism by a broad coalition of anti-alcohol Americans. Moreover, some of Prohibition's effects are still very much with us, as both law and social custom, and as a negative example of intrusive government policy.

Prohibition, Okrent writes, was “a popular movement like none the nation had ever seen—a mighty alliance of moralists and progressives, suffragists and xenophobes” that “legally seized the Constitution, bending it to a new purpose.” How, Okrent asks, “did a freedom loving people decide to give up a private right that had been freely exercised by millions upon millions since the first European colonists arrived in the New World?”

And how did Prohibition's supporters manage to kill off an industry that at the time was America's fifth largest?

America had been a booze-soaked nation from its birth; the American taste for alcohol went back to the Puritans, whose “modes of purity did not include abstinence.” By the 19th century, when the temperance movement got underway, the United States was enveloped in what Okrent calls an “alcoholic miasma.” Beer and liquor were easily available to anyone who wanted a drink and consumed in amounts that strike us today as wildly excessive.

The social costs of heavy drinking were high, particularly when it came to family life. Men who preferred to imbibe in saloons with their fellows than to be at home squandered the family income on liquor. Alcoholics who could not hold down a job drove their families to destitution. Women and children suffered violence, neglect, and abandonment; wives contracted

sexually transmitted diseases as a consequence of their husbands' drunken sexual encounters with prostitutes. Feminists and suffragists were prominent in the pre-Prohibition temperance movement and ardently supported the 18th Amendment largely because of alcohol's impact on women and children.

But Prohibition was about more than banning booze. Its advocates created the federal income tax, linked their domestic goals to the conduct of World War I, and fought for universal suffrage. Prohibition also gave birth to organized crime syndicates, which thrived on the illegal trade in alcohol. "Prohibition," Okrent observes, "changed the way we live, and it fundamentally redefined the role of the federal government."

The origins of Prohibition were in the Washingtonian Movement, which arose in Baltimore in 1840 with the vow of six habitual drinkers to commit to total abstinence. The movement, however, didn't aim to change laws; its leaders instead relied on moral suasion and on overheated rhetoric about the evils of drinking.

Around the same time, a group of women in upstate New York began to agitate against alcohol. Their ranks included future feminist leaders Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Frances Willard, one of the founders of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, explicitly linked the anti-alcohol crusade to feminism and the right of women to vote. "Only some form of legal prohibition could crush the liquor demon," she proclaimed, "and no such prohibition would ever be enacted without the votes of women." Willard, however, was not a single issue activist: her motto, "Do Everything," led the WCTU to adopt progressive, even socialist positions, including support for the eight-hour workday, worker's rights, and government ownership of factories, utilities, and railroads.

Socialists and union organizers attacked the liquor trade "as an exemplar of capitalism and liquor itself as a corrupter of human potential." The African American labor leader A. Philip Randolph argued that Prohibition would lower crime, raise wages, and lessen political corruption. The radical Industrial Workers of the World, better known as the Wobblies, also endorsed the anti-booze cause.

The temperance movement, however, was an ideologically diverse coalition whose ranks included anti-immigrant nativists and overt racists as well as progressives. The Ku Klux Klan, prominent among the anti-alcohol forces, targeted Jews and Catholic immigrants even more than blacks. In fact, by mainly espousing anti-Semitism and nativism during the early 20th century, the Klan spread its influence far outside the south, to New England, the Middle Atlantic, the Midwest and the Pacific Northwest.

The author Gay Talese has called prohibitionists “WASP zealots of sobriety,” and that’s exactly how Jews and Catholics viewed them. Both groups opposed Prohibition with “near unanimity and absolute vehemence,” says Okrent. They feared it would interfere with the practice of their religions, since they both used wine for sacramental purposes. But they had another reason to resist it: Catholics and Jews “peered behind the Prohibition banner and saw the white-hooded hatred of the Ku Klux Klan and the foaming xenophobia of the nativist pastors who dominated the Methodist and Baptist churches.”

But even some progressive reformers were unabashed bigots. As America became more urbanized, its cities filled with European immigrants for whom drinking—in the home, at social events, and in religious observance—was a cherished cultural practice. Frances Willard, appalled by what she saw as “the infidel foreign population of our country,” pressed for immigration restrictions to “keep out the scum of the Old World.”

Nativism, infused with prohibitionist sentiment, served to justify America’s involvement in World War I. President Woodrow Wilson was indifferent to the Anti-Saloon League, the most effective prohibition organization. But his propaganda in favor of U.S. entry in the First World War echoed the ASL’s demonization of Germans as “disloyal servants of the Kaiser.” Wilson attacked foreign-born Americans who, he charged, had “poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life.”

The economics of the liquor industry posed a formidable challenge to the temperance movement: by 1875, one third of all federal revenues came from alcohol sales. To counter the argument that banning booze would be disastrous for the federal government, prohibitionists successfully lobbied Congress to enact the federal income tax. Wealthy conservatives who already opposed Prohibition as an unwarranted government intrusion on liberty found another reason to fight it in the hated new tax.

By the dawn of the 20th century, the battle lines were drawn between the “drys” and the “wets.” The nation’s brewing and distilling industries, though economically powerful, could not overcome their mutual antipathy to coalesce around their shared interests. The brewers were especially politically clueless. Because suffragists supported Prohibition, they fought women’s suffrage, thereby alienating masses of American women, many of whom would have been opposed or at least neutral on Prohibition.

By 1917, 23 states had dry laws, though few were as “bone dry” as the 18th Amendment. To come was a state-by-state ratification campaign, which required the drys to win a minimum of 36 separate battles in state legislatures. Despite this formidable challenge, ratification “sped along with astonishing velocity,” thanks to the superior organizing skills and political muscle of the dry forces, who consistently outmaneuvered their often better-funded adversaries.

But to the surprise of no one except perhaps the most zealous Prohibitionists, the 18th Amendment, and its enabling legislation, the Volstead Act, did not end drinking in America. In fact, enforcement largely was a failure. Some states permitted the medicinal use of alcohol, and between 1920 and 1925, American production of industrial alcohol nearly tripled. Homemade wine production markedly increased. And thanks to the entrepreneurial ingenuity of bootleggers, illegal liquor poured into the country through the porous Canadian-U.S. border and from the Caribbean.

American organized crime got flush during Prohibition, and indeed became organized as never before, as criminals formed syndicates to distribute illegal liquor. Prohibition, in fact, “offered a graduate course for training in the crime industry.” Chicago mobsters like John Torrio, and most notoriously, Al Capone, built the bootleg liquor trade into a large scale, highly lucrative enterprise.

To ensure the smooth functioning of the bootlegging business, mobsters needed to build alliances across the country. These partnerships were, Okrent notes, “the first manifestations of a crime syndicate operating on a national scale.” The gangland alliances have come to be known collectively as The Mafia, but that’s Hollywood mythology; the bootleggers were an ethnically-mixed bunch, comprising Italians, Jews, Irish, and other nationalities.

Despite their attempts to organize and rationalize their business, warfare did break out among them, with murder a common consequence of “broken contracts that did not lend themselves to polite resolution.”

With bars and other drinking establishments outlawed, Americans found new places where they could consume alcohol. In black neighborhoods, private apartments known as “hooch joints” or “buffet flats” were the preferred venues. Speakeasies, which Okrent defines as “any publicly accessible place where one could buy a drink,” were popular and widespread, “indelibly part of American culture.” New York, the wettest of wet cities, boasted some 32,000 illegal drinking places in the 1920s, including the famous 21 Club.

Although American ingenuity found ways around Prohibition, the illegal nature of alcohol, a market now unregulated by any governmental authority, resulted in serious quality control problems. “Speakeasy liquor could have been anything from single-malt Scotch . . . to diluted embalming fluid,” Okrent notes. Unscrupulous bootleggers poisoned customers with concoctions made from wood alcohol and isopropyl alcohol, leading to blindness (giving birth to the expression “blind drunk”), paralysis, and death.

Prohibition not only changed where Americans drank, but also who drank. Whereas the pre-Prohibition saloon was a male redoubt, women frequented speakeasies, “a shock both severe and enduring.” The sexual integration of the speakeasies generated new forms of entertainment—jazz bands, torch singers, and dance crazes like the Charleston. Another social barrier fell with the emergence of “black and tans,” racially integrated cabarets and nightclubs, usually in black neighborhoods, that featured leading African American jazz bands.

By the late 1920s, resistance to Prohibition was widespread. In the “resolutely wet cities and states,” little or no funding was allocated for enforcement, which “ran the gamut from ineffectual to ridiculous.” Prohibition suffered its worst year in 1929, with the stock market crash and the subsequent Great Depression. Economic hard times brought mass unemployment, a collapse in federal tax revenues, and growing antipathy to the federal government and particularly the Republican Party, resulting in the election of the anti-Prohibition Franklin Delano Roosevelt as president. The Depression strengthened the repeal argument because repeal would

bring in more tax revenue and would create jobs in the brewing and distilling industries and in ancillary businesses.

Opposition to Prohibition grew exponentially, and it became obvious that the unprecedented could actually happen—the repeal of a Constitutional amendment. The Association against the Prohibition Amendment, backed largely by the tycoon Pierre du Pont, sought to repeal both Prohibition and the federal income tax that had been instituted to make up for lost alcohol tax revenues.

In 1933, the 21st Amendment came up for debate in Congress; it stated, with admirable brevity, that “The eighteenth article of amendment to the Constitution of the United States is hereby repealed.” By the summer of that year, 15 states ratified the repeal amendment. With the vote of Utah in December, Prohibition died.

Okrent delivers his verdict on Prohibition: “in almost every respect imaginable,” it was a failure. “It encouraged criminality and institutionalized hypocrisy. It deprived the government of revenue, stripped the gears of the political system, and imposed profound limitations on individual rights.” But in one respect Prohibition succeeded: during its 14 years, Americans overall did drink less than they had before its enactment, and that trend continued for decades afterward. Repeal, he notes, “did not open the spigots; the pre-Prohibition per capita peak of 2.6 gallons [of alcohol annually consumed per person] was not again attained until 1973.” Repeal also replaced “the almost anything goes ethos with a series of state by state codes, regulations and enforcement procedures. . . . Just as Prohibition did not prohibit, making drink legal did not make drink entirely available.”

Prohibition’s “most enduring legacy,” Okrent concludes, is likely its “robust versatility as an example or remonstrance”—in other words, a lesson in how not to make social policy and law. It’s one that has obvious contemporary relevance: “Because Prohibition proved the nation could not legislate personal morality, advocates for the legalization of drugs have been able to draw a direct parallel to their own argument.”

Supporters of marijuana legalization—whether for medicinal or recreational use—certainly promote their cause with analogies to the failures of Prohibition. Perhaps some day an author will chronicle the rise and fall of

pot prohibition as superbly as Daniel Okrent has recounted America's peculiar social experiment with banning booze.

Reviewer [George De Stefano](#) is a New York-based author and critic. He is the author of *An Offer We Can't Refuse: The Mafia in the Mind of America* (Faber & Faber/Farrar, Straus, Giroux). He is also a member of the National Book Critics Circle.